

AMERICAN ARTSCAPE®

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CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

EQUITY AND ACCESS
IN THE ARTS FOR
NATIVE AMERICAN
COMMUNITIES



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This issue

“We are here together to carry the creative and thoughtful spirit of the people forward, to assist in feeding the imagination, the heart and soul of the people.”

U.S. Poet Laureate (and NEA Literature Fellow) Joy Harjo (Muscogee/Creek) spoke of the power of the arts in her keynote address at Native Arts and Culture: Resilience, Reclamation, and Relevance, a first-of-its-kind national convening that was hosted by the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Native Arts & Cultures Foundation in February 2020. Members from more than 40 tribal nations participated in the convening, as well as the heads of several federal agencies, and important nation-to-nation work in the arts was accomplished. But there remains much to be done to support Native arts and culture, and one of the ways is to share information on what Native artists are doing today and how the various Native cultures interact with and enhance American culture. In this issue, we look at artists and arts organizations who, in their own words, share how they are moving their culture and their people forward through their creativity.

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Cover: Fashion Designer Korina Emmerich (Puyallup) in her studio. Photo by Korina Emmerich, courtesy of EMME Studio

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Changing the Story

BY MARIA ROSARIO JACKSON, PHD

“If we can change the story, we can change the future,” said Crystal Echo Hawk (Pawnee), executive director of IllumiNative, at the 2020 convening Native Arts and Culture: Resilience, Reclamation, and Relevance. IllumiNative is a nonprofit that challenges negative narratives about Native Americans and attempts to increase their visibility in culture and society. One of IllumiNative’s major initiatives is the Reclaiming Native Truth project—the largest public opinion research project of its kind on Native populations. The data they gathered was sobering. According to their research, 78 percent of Americans said they have no knowledge about Native people, with 72 percent reporting that they have never encountered information about Native people anywhere. Nearly 90 percent of state-level history standards for K-12 education failed to cover Native history past the year 1900. Looking at television and film, it doesn’t get any better—less than 0.4 percent of this content includes representation of Native American

characters. This lack of visibility and inclusion, to the detriment of everyone, has rendered Native peoples as virtually invisible in today’s society.

One of the positive findings of the Reclaiming Native Truth project was that 78 percent of Americans were interested in learning more about Native cultures. Fortunately, we can turn to the arts as a critically important way in which Native Americans tell and share their own stories. As U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo)—the first Native American Cabinet secretary for the United States—said at the 2021 Americas Cultural Summit, “The arts, like culture, build on, learn from, and react to the history of people and places.”

In this issue, we look at a few of the Native artists and arts organizations whose work is a testament to the fact that Native culture is alive, innovative, and an intricate part of the contemporary landscape. Fashion designer Korina Emmerich (Puyallup), who helped dress Secretary Haaland for her historic, award-winning cover shoot for *InStyle* magazine,

▲ NEA Chair
Dr. Maria Rosario
Jackson. Photo by
David K. Riddick

describes balancing the risk of being tokenized as a Native designer while also working toward access to larger platforms. Sarah Whalen-Lunn (Iñupiaq), whose art is traditional tattooing, talks about reclaiming and taking pride in her Native culture.

Emmerich and Whalen-Lunn both reflect on the individual and communal healing aspects of their art practices, a theme that continues through the issue. Tim Keenan Burgess (Paiute/Shoshone) of the nonprofit Wisdom of the Elders has produced two films on the Native people of Oregon, looking at how their traditional ecological knowledge guided their stewardship of the land and can provide a blueprint for reframing our relationship with the Earth to combat climate change. Tash Terry (Diné [Navajo]) and Elena Higgins (Maori/Samoan) of IndigenousWays, a nonprofit in New Mexico, talk about how projects like their Indigenous Healing Festival bring together music, community, and Indigenous spiritual practices.

We also talk with some arts organization leaders who are trying to counteract the lack of teaching about contemporary Native culture. Chris Newell, through his work with Akomawt Educational Initiative, works to, as he puts it, “re-Indigenize” history by incorporating Native content into material at institutions like museums, universities, and K-12 schools. Kim Blaeser (Anishinaabe), founding director of Indigenous Nations Poets, focuses on supporting Indigenous writers and preserving their languages through poetry.

Altogether, these contemporary Native American artists, arts leaders, and tradition bearers are working to advance and preserve their cultures while helping all of us to live more inclusive, artful lives. They illuminate how their Indigenous cultures and art can help strengthen and revitalize all of our communities.

Maria Rosario Jackson, PhD, is chair of the National Endowment for the Arts.

▼ Results from the Reclaiming Native Truth project. Image courtesy of IllumiNative

Content analyses of primetime television and popular films reveal that the inclusion of

NATIVE AMERICAN CHARACTERS RANGES FROM ZERO TO 0.4%.

78%
OF AMERICANS want to learn more about Native people, their histories, cultures and **CONTEMPORARY STORIES.**

72% believe it is necessary to make significant changes to school curricula on **NATIVE AMERICAN HISTORY AND CULTURE.**

MOST AMERICANS feel that what they learned — or are teaching — in school about Native culture is inaccurate, and they **STRONGLY SUPPORT** the need for curriculum change.

PEOPLE OFTEN EXPRESS **DISAPPOINTMENT OR ANGER** that what they were taught was so **SPARSE OR MISLEADING.**

87% of state-level history standards **FAIL TO COVER NATIVE PEOPLE HISTORY** in a post-1900 context.



HAUTE & HANDMADE

A CONVERSATION WITH FASHION DESIGNER
KORINA EMMERICH (PUYALLUP)

INTERVIEW BY PAULETTE BEETE

The cover of the August 2021 issue of *InStyle* magazine features a powerful portrait of U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) wearing one of

her own powwow scarves, jewelry by Native designers, and a vibrant blue jersey dress designed and hand-sewn by fashion designer Korina Emmerich (Puyallup). The cover is notable

▲ Models display Emmerich's Drugstore Rodeo 2021 collection. Photo by Two Hawks Young, courtesy of EMME Studio

not only for featuring a prominent Native woman, but also for showcasing the work of Indigenous designers. As Emmerich commented in a radio interview, “As Indigenous people we tend to often get published a lot in online stories. We don’t actually get a chance often to be inside of [physical] magazines or on the cover of magazines.”

While well-known Native designers are still a rarity in high fashion, the Oregon-born artist has been preparing for this moment in the spotlight her whole life. “I’ve been obsessed with fashion since a really, really young age. I would just cover my walls in all magazine tear sheets,” she remembered. Emmerich’s interest in fashion led to an undergraduate degree in fashion design at the Art Institute in Portland, after which she moved to New York City, where she’s now lived for more than a decade. While her participation in Season 13 of *Project Runway* led to her debuting a collection at Lord and Taylor, it also gave her a taste of what she didn’t like about fashion,

notably the high costs and high waste. Now running her fashion line EMMÉ singlehandedly from her Brooklyn apartment, Emmerich is part of the slow fashion movement, with a focus on sustainability and climate awareness as well as aesthetics. Her approach is not surprising, given that she primarily thinks of herself as an artist. As she said when we spoke by video chat for this interview, “I like to think of myself more as an artist than someone who owns a clothing company. It’s like artwork, but textiles are my medium.”

What follows in Emmerich’s own voice are her thoughts on how her Puyallup heritage has informed her approach to the fashion industry, the blurry line between representation and tokenism, and her deep belief: “Everything you put out is an extension of you and your energy and your story.”

HOW HER CULTURAL ROOTS INFORM HER APPROACH TO FASHION DESIGN

I have a sign next to my sewing machine that says, “Everything you make returns to the Earth as either food or poison.” I put so much care into every single thing I make, and I make it with my own two hands. For me, it’s like a healing process to go through this creative process, and I’m so grateful to be able to spend that time and to be able to do what I do. I think a lot of that comes from all of our teachings when we were kids, to be very aware of your impact, that everything is related, that everything is circular. Something that is inherent about the way a lot of Indigenous people move through the world is that we’re very aware of our impact and our use of resources. I use a lot of cradle-to-cradle fabrics instead of cradle-to-grave, which means a lot of the wools I use during the biodegradation process become nutrients to the soil rather than just being poison.

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE KNOWN AS A NATIVE DESIGNER

When I was in school, I didn’t want to be the “Native” designer. I was always thinking, “I want to be a designer who happens to be Native.” It’s almost like you get cornered into this category where that designation almost feels performative. While [my Native heritage] is really important to me and the work that I do, it’s not always something that I choose to talk about. I didn’t want to be pigeonholed as a Native designer, because the representation in fashion was only in a negative way from our point of view, as far as cultural appropriation goes. You see all these

▼ Fashion designer
Korina Emmerich.
Photo by Korina
Emmerich, courtesy
of EMMÉ Studio



models in headdresses and everything that was just so silly. I think our representation was almost through this mythical lens. Because we're so often put into a historical context, people think we don't exist anymore, that we're not on the other end of an email. We exist here and now, and I think now we're changing that whole narrative.

Social media has leveled this playing field, where [as Native designers] we are able to have control of our own voices and how we're seen. It's not through somebody else telling our story. It's a big deal as far as representation that our story and our narrative is coming from us here and now in 2022. It's not through some text that is inaccurate or goods that are stolen that were put into a museum. Obviously, we have such great respect for that older work, but we are also continuing to do work now, and that has a story to tell too. The next hurdle is to break that idea that we're a monolith, because Indigenous people are so diverse. We all have different stories, we all have different food, we all have different traditions, we all have different regalia, all of our ceremonies are very different. One conversation that's so interesting is, "What are we called? American Indian? Native American?" The terms always change because people try to put us into a singular category. I prefer Puyallup. That's my tribe. That's what I am.

REPRESENTATION OR TOKENISM?

There is always a level of responsibility to any work that you're putting out into the world, and I understand now, as an adult, the importance of my voice and work ... and how I am representing the Indigenous fashion scene. Part of the work that I do is to celebrate that. You get to open some doors that previously you didn't even think could open. Recently, I made a comment that I think [the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA)] just realized that Indigenous people still exist, because I got a call from them to do a meeting. The first thing I asked was, "Are we having this meeting because you have no Indigenous representation in the CFDA?" I just think it's so



funny that the Council of Fashion Designers of America has no Indigenous people, and our traditional work that's being made today, it's handmade couture, like the ultimate high fashion. It's somehow always been recognized as craft, and that word is so interesting.

It's always associated with something that is not considered a highly respectable art form, and that's why women's work was always called craft, and Indigenous work is called craft. It's highly talented, amazing, incredible work, but that word always makes it seem like it's not luxury, I guess.

Being part of these large platforms, it's like a sense of validity for your work. To have something at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute], it's a huge deal. I have a really hard time sometimes celebrating those things. We're in a weird stage almost of tokenism, where it's like are we getting

these opportunities because this

group of white people are sitting around a table being like okay, well let's just check each one of these BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] boxes? Like with [Secretary of the Interior] Deb Haaland [for *InStyle* magazine], it's only if it's an Indigenous person being dressed do I get big magazine asks. It's not just for whoever, and I'm hoping we can break that barrier soon.

Another thing that's interesting, as far as that whole gatekeeping mentality, it's like there's one opportunity. There's one Indigenous person that gets to be in this show. There's one Indigenous person that gets to be a fashion writer. With the Met, I was the only Indigenous designer included in 100 looks. I had a whole email exchange with the curators about how there is going to be more Indigenous representation in the second part of the show, and I don't know for sure who's going to be in it. I didn't know that I was the only Indigenous person in the [first part of the] show until a reporter reached out and told me. I think that breeds this weird competition where we're looking for validation from these gatekeepers, and then they give us one spot.

What's so important in the Indigenous design community is we're so supportive of each other.

◀ Emmerich's design that was included in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Costume Institute's exhibition *In America: A Lexicon of Fashion*. Photo courtesy of EMME Studios

Collaborations are huge; we're always doing cross promotion. We want everybody to succeed together. We want to move up together. So it does feel strange sometimes when what they're offering are these crumbs.

HOW CONSUMERS CAN SUPPORT NATIVE FASHION DESIGNERS

One thing that's so great about us supporting each other in the design community [on social media] is you can find one Indigenous designer and then open up your world from there and see everybody else that is doing work. Look at the comments section. Look at who's tagged.

▼ Yakima coat designed by Korina Emmerich, modeled by Laura Ortman. Photo by Fyodor Shiryayev, courtesy of EMME Studio



I think patience is really important too, to have the respect for those things that you're receiving or buying. I think it's great to support Indigenous designers because, for a lot of us, that's our only income, and, unfortunately, we have to engage in a capitalistic society. It's just a great way to support our autonomy. A lot of Indigenous designers do things that are handmade, because the design process is a very healing process. I have a handwritten piece of tape on my sewing machine that says, "Your energy goes into your work," and I'm just so aware of what I'm putting into the things that I'm sending out to people.

Paulette Beete is the social media manager in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

Chris Newell and two-time world champion hoop dancer Lisa Odjig (Ojibwe) perform at the inaugural Indigenous People's Day celebration at the Museum of Fine Art Boston in 2019. Photo by Michael Mermelstein



TELLING AMERICAN HISTORY THROUGH A NATIVE LENS

A TALK WITH EDUCATOR CHRIS NEWELL (PASSAMAQUODDY)

INTERVIEW BY CLIFFORD MURPHY, PHD

When talking about his educational bonafides, historian and museum educator Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) may tell people that he went to the school of Wayne Newell. The elder Newell, Chris' father, was an early advocate for the study and preservation of Native American cultures from an Indigenous, rather than colonizer, point of view. As Newell noted in our interview, "I got to grow up watching [my father's] educational efforts in a different time period, where they were starting basically from scratch. A lot of my father's work happened actually at the kitchen

table in my own house." His father's insistence on understanding Native Americans as members of living cultural communities has been at the heart of Newell's own work. While the first part of the younger Newell's career was as a traveling musician who played Indigenous music, he now runs the New England-based educational consultancy Akomawt Educational Initiative with co-founders endawnis Spears (Diné/Ojibwe/Chickasaw/Choctaw) and Dr. Jason Mancini. The trio's mission is to educate museums, schools, and other institutions on how to work with tribal art and artifacts in a way that foregrounds Indigenous cultural practices and ways of

► Chris Newell (right) with his father Wayne Newell enjoying a moment after a special performance and talking circle to welcome the sunrise with Wabanaki performers and Grammy-winning cellist Yo-Yo Ma in Acadia National Park in June 2021. Photo by Sipsis Peciptaq Elamoqessik (Brianna Smith)



thinking. The goal is not to completely discredit the work of archaeologists and anthropologists but instead to show what that primarily white gaze has left out of the story. What follows in Chris Newell’s own words is his explanation of why language is so important to understanding culture, and what it means to take a “new” look at American history through an Indigenous lens.

[Ed. Note: Chris Newell mentions recordings made in 1890 by late 19th-/early 20th-century anthropologist Jesse Walter Fewkes of early Passamaquoddy language speakers, which were eventually obtained by the Library of Congress; the recordings were digitized from the original wax cylinders and made available to the Passamaquoddy Tribe. The NEA awarded a grant to the tribal government to support the transcription and translation of these field recordings.]

ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND PRESERVATION

Where I come from ties into everything that I do. I come from the community of Motahkmikuhk, which is now known as Indian Township, Maine, in the English language. That’s one of the two Passamaquoddy reservations in the state of Maine. I’m a Passamaquoddy tribal

citizen born and raised there, and I am the son of Wayne Newell, one of the first members of the American Indian Program when it began at Harvard University, where he earned his master’s in education. One of the things my father always worked on was our language preservation. He grew up in a Passamaquoddy-speaking household. No running water. No electricity. He was born at home in a community where English was definitely a second language. He didn’t start learning English until he decided to put himself into the nun’s school that was on the reservation at about nine or ten years old. I’ve definitely grown up with that normative that English is a foreign language to this territory, especially in my household. My grandmother who lived with us also spoke Passamaquoddy, so it was a spoken language in our house every day.

However, as our tribe started to work toward federal recognition and started to get access to money for housing on the reservation with electricity, with running water, what my father and others started to observe is that with English-speaking media coming into our households, like radios and televisions, that the children, myself included, were learning English first not Passamaquoddy first. And then we were going to the [Bureau of Indian Affairs] school, which is English-only. Passamaquoddy was being

taught as an extracurricular; it wasn't even being taught until my father and others started those programs. Before that, the only place you could learn Passamaquoddy was in a Passamaquoddy-speaking household. He realized that if we have a generation growing up speaking only English, then they lose that ancestral tie, because one of the things our language does is it ties us to all of our ancestors. It ties us to the land, because our language was formed on the landscape that we currently live on in the Dawnland, in our home territory. By keeping those things alive, the music as well as the language, we can, in the modern-day times, still be tied to all of our ancestors from the past and maintain the continuity going forward.

One of the reasons why those Jesse Walter Fewkes recordings are so valuable is because the state of Maine did have a lot to do with erasure of culture. And we have learned quite a bit from them. They have now been given to us as part of our own collection in the Passamaquoddy community. You hear the speakers, and they speak our language. You get to hear how it was spoken in the 1890s versus how it is spoken in 2021, or even the 1970s, different eras. We can understand the fluidity of our culture and our language; that it is not a static thing, that it's always changed and adjusted over time.

AKOMAWT EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVE AND WORKING TO "RE-INDIGENIZE" HISTORY

Akomawt is a Passamaquoddy word for the "snowshoe path." That is a symbol that drives me and my two partners in our educational work. The snowshoe path is the common path that we're talking about. People would go out into the natural world to do what they needed and find their way back home to the village on that pathway. Through the seasons it disappears, and it comes back, and it adjusts itself as it goes forward. In that way, we're trying to incorporate new learning paths for educators. You can see right there, by bringing Passamaquoddy language even to the name of the work that I do with Akomawt Educational Initiative, it is guiding me with that ancestral knowledge.

Even though I started in classroom education as a substitute teacher, I really found my niche as I began working at the Pequot Museum as a museum educator. Akomawt Educational Initiative was born at the Pequot Museum [the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center, located in Mashantucket, Connecticut, is owned and operated by the Mashantucket Pequot

Tribal Nation].... We really saw the value in taking what we started at the Pequot Museum and moving it to the museum world in general; so that Pequot history is not taught as an extracurricular in the Pequot Museum only. It's just taught as history.

The Pequot Museum is a tribal museum and tells the history of Pequot people unapologetically from the perspective of Pequots. This is very different from the perspective you often get in a colonial museum, which is oftentimes guided by the sciences of archaeology and anthropology, which are created by non-Natives and are largely dominated by the minds of non-Natives. Therefore, colonial museums have been part of an extractive process for Native peoples. Items like Jesse Walter Fewkes recordings have sat in collections with very limited access. I mean, now we have computers, [but before widespread computer use] oftentimes to get access you had to go through layers and layers and layers and layers to be able to get to something that you have a blood tie or an ancestral tie to yourself.

Our work with Akomawt Educational Initiative is really about helping colonial institutions like museums—as well as educational institutions, colleges, universities, K-12 schools—to incorporate Native content in an equitable fashion. In other words, if you're going to have these objects and you're going to display them,

▼ Akomawt Educational Initiative co-founders (left to right) endawnis Spears, Dr. Jason Mancini, and Chris Newell. Photo courtesy of Akomawt Educational Initiative



then you should really center the voices of the living communities that they come from rather than the voices of archaeology and anthropology, which have oftentimes skewed these understandings. You can combine these two [interpretive stances] together and you can actually get the best of both worlds.

That's really a lot of what Akomawt does, a lot of bridge building. What we realize is that if you're going to do what in the museum world they call the decolonization work—what I really call re-Indigenizing education and history—these institutions need to build these relationships with their own Indigenous landscape, with the Indigenous communities and peoples that are around them. Remember, 70 percent of Native people live off-reservation, so Indian Country is literally everywhere. You really have to develop those local relationships, and it has to be done in an equitable fashion. That's one of the things that we're helping institutions to work toward. That would include a lot of Boston institutions like the MFA [Museum of Fine Arts] Boston, but also the National Park Service. I've done work with the Acadia National Park, but we also do work with National Park Service Boston as well as Region

One. The National Park Service is the largest single educational institutional in this country, so if we can make change in that institution, we can effect change on a large scale.

One of the things that I'm most proud about is that we started out as an idea. And just by word-of-mouth, without advertising ourselves, our work was effective enough that many people were coming to us asking, "How do we engage Native communities?"

The beautiful thing about this work is that it's multigenerational. I always tell people that my intended goals, I may not live to see them. As my father in his work, he understood that his intended goals, he would likely not live to see them. Yet, it did not mean he did not do the work, because it's about the world we leave for our children and our children's children. My father left this world a better place for me, left behind tools for me to actively reengage with my language and with my music. I want to make sure that my children and their children have those as well.

Clifford Murphy, PhD, is the National Endowment for the Arts director of Folk and Traditional Arts.

► Chris Newell leading a section of a museum professional development workshop at Yale University Art Gallery for Akomawt Educational Initiative in 2020. Photo courtesy of Akomawt Educational Initiative





CARRYING OUR CULTURE FORWARD

**KIM BLAESER (ANISHINAABE)
OF INDIGENOUS NATIONS POETS**

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS

When poet and professor Kim Blaeser (Anishinaabe) was a young girl, her family would travel hundreds of miles from their home on the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota to Montana for her father's work. She recalls these car trips as being filled with storytelling, singing, and poetry as her father would recite "The Village Blacksmith" and long passages of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" from memory.

Blaeser has carried her family's love of language throughout her career as a poet and scholar. She is a past Wisconsin Poet Laureate, author of five poetry collections, and currently serves as a professor at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee and MFA faculty for the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. Blaeser is also founding director of the nonprofit In-Na-Po—Indigenous Nations Poets.

In-Na-Po is a national Indigenous poetry community that supports emerging writers and Indigenous poetic practices. The organization

is part of the Poetry Coalition, a group of more than 25 independent poetry organizations that promote poetry's societal and artistic value.

Blaeser spoke to the Arts Endowment about the importance of poetry and art in her life and Native communities, the founding of In-Na-Po, her hopes for its future, and the role of poetry in preserving Native languages and affirming tribal sovereignty.

RHYTHM OF LIFE

I should introduce myself the way that's proper, which is, Kim Blaeser *nindizhinikaaz. Anishinaabekwe nindaaw. Gaa-waabaabinganikaag nindonjibaa. Migizi nindoodem.*

I grew up on the White Earth Reservation in northwestern Minnesota. That's my home place, and in my earliest years, I grew up literally in the middle of nowhere at my grandparents' farm, 26 miles by horse from the nearest country store. It

▲ Kim Blaeser, founding director of Indigenous Nations Poets, or In-Na-Po. Photo by John Fisher



▲ In-Na-Po reading event held virtually and hosted by Woodland Pattern Book Center. Photo courtesy of In-Na-Po

was like I was living in another era; it was another culture, and it was very alive with oral stories and word play.

I had this lively family of storytellers. I think there’s something about that that feeds you. I was nourished in my love of language, in my love of stories and songs and word play, and I really think of that as the foundation for the work I do now. I began writing poetry when I learned to write, and I’ve written poetry my whole life. When I was too shy to speak, I often turned to language on the page or invented things in my head. Reciting poetry out loud was not an unusual thing in our house. The rhythm of my life was around language and performance and how that was a part of community.

When I think about Indigenous literature broadly and I think about the arts in Native communities, I always talk about them as being both affective and effective. For poetry: it’s beautiful as language, but it also does something in the world. Those two things are happening simultaneously, and that’s part of a really important foundation in Indigenous literatures. The way that our arts have always been practiced, they’re nurturing to the community. They help us flourish as people, they make us stronger, they reinforce our teachings.

Harold Bloom introduced that phrase “anxiety of influence,” and I always think of Native arts as not engaged in this great anxiety of influence but instead engaged in a celebration of influence, because we carry forward the stories, the teachings, the songs, the voices, the history, the land traditions. All of those parts of our culture are not something we want to break ourselves

from. We don’t say, “Oh, I’m going to be different from these voices.” We say, “Oh, my gosh. These voices are so important to me and let me amplify them and expand on them and show how they apply to the world we live in now.”

I’m not suggesting no one is out there doing something innovative, because there’s all kinds of innovation, but there’s a foundation that is important. We’re not abandoning; we’re

adapting to new materials and philosophically we’re adapting to new circumstances. We’ve always been taught that art is a gift, and it’s a gift that helps us in our living.

IN-NA-PO, THE ORIGIN STORY

A few years back, at the Association of Writers & Writing Programs (AWP) conference, I had a long conversation with Jen Benka, the head of the Academy of American Poets. She talked about the Poetry Coalition, this wonderful gathering of more than 25 organizations—including Cave Canem, Kundiman, and other organizations that support writers from particular communities, including poets of color—and she said, “I’m holding a space. I’d love to have a Native organization.” I said, “All right, I’ll do that.” Honestly, it took a while for me. It’s a huge undertaking.

We actually founded In-Na-Po in 2020. It’s a national Indigenous community, mentoring emerging writers but it’s also nurturing the growth of Indigenous poetic practices, which aren’t always exactly the same as other poetic practices. That means supporting sovereignty, supporting Indigenous languages, and then in general, supporting and raising the visibility of all Native writers—especially those early writers who continue to influence the work we do now as well as all of the young writers who are just touching pen to paper or fingers to a keyboard.

The idea is not to segregate Indigenous writers from the rest of poets or the writing world. It’s to help them find their way within those communities. Whether that’s publishing or

funding or attending writing retreats, it's showing them how to get there, and also letting them know that we have their back.

We're going to have our first mentoring retreat in Washington, DC, in April 2022 at the Library of Congress. Joy Harjo will be finishing out her term as U.S. Poet Laureate, so she'll be with us for these five days. It'll be a space [where Native writers] don't have to explain to somebody else who they are, where they come from, how their art is connected to their culture. They can do the work, and not have to stop and explain the work, or justify themselves, or create a safe zone around themselves.

Paul Chaat Smith is a Comanche author, and he's an art curator. I often quote him, because he says, "Artists are deeply respected in the Native world. We ask of them just two things: make fabulous art, and lead the revolution." That's how I'm seeing what we're doing now.

LANGUAGE AS RESISTANCE

A lot of Indigenous writers are allowing their language to come into their writing. I've always gone between Anishinaabe and English, but also inhabit that kind of middle space—code-shifting—where you're distorting one or the other, which is what people do when they live between languages. There's this sense of claiming. It's a celebration, but you are also reinforcing your own knowledge of the language.

Writing this way is an act of resistance. It is also self-preservation. As Native writers, we've had to shut off certain elements of our experience, and those are the doors that are being opened again. We're saying, "No, this is welcome." I talk about with my students the idea of "archive," and how there are things in and outside the archive. Our oral stories, our songs, our oral poems, have not been in the archive. But Indigenous people are

saying, "Huh! We have our own archive. We're celebrating our own records, our own memories, the way that we keep our traditions." That is another act of sovereignty.

There are a lot of those subtle ways that we might enact sovereignty, but I think that you can't read Native literature, poetry, without seeing that poets are also engaged in the politics of the time. They're engaged in critique of historical genocide, inequity, all of those things; and they are claiming, in so many different ways, tribal sovereignty. I feel like In-Na-Po could not separate those two missions, that they are just bound together; that, as writers, we are writing for and with our nation, and that means we are a nation. That means that we belong to that tribal nation, as well as existing within the United States.

For example, I recently wrote about *ma'iingan*, or wolf. Since the wolf was delisted [from the endangered species list], there have been hunting seasons, including here in Wisconsin. For the Anishinaabe people and many tribes, we have a certain reverence for the wolf. We actually have a Wolf Clan, and we have had a long-standing relationship [with the wolf]. So, that slaughter just isn't acceptable for us. My reservation, White Earth, passed a law and made White Earth a wolf sanctuary. That is another arm of sovereignty—we make our own laws about how we will behave, but we also want to share what we've learned over centuries with those other people who may not have had the same relationship, or teachings, or understanding.

But if we only practice these things within our own territories, that's not going to keep safe other places. A lot of Indigenous people live in urban areas now, and the sovereignty of our languages and our belief systems should extend to wherever Indigenous people are. The elements of Indigenous poetry come out of some of those tribal teachings; the Indigenous knowledge is not only for our nations.

Poetry from Indigenous nations remembers and celebrates our resilient cultures; it also maps a path, a way of being in today's complex world.

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

◀ An In-Na-Po reading at Printer's Row Literature Festival in Chicago, Illinois. Photo courtesy of In-Na-Po



The Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon.

On the



Front Lines

Tim Keenan Burgess (Paiute/Shoshone)
of Wisdom of the Elders

INTERVIEW BY VICTORIA HUTTER

All photos by Tim Keenan Burgess, Wisdom of the Elders

Anyone who has been shocked by the enormous wild fires in the West, fierce tornados in the Midwest, or watched azaleas bloom in December knows that climate change has arrived. We are living it.

Native Americans, who live *with* the land not just *on* the land, have been especially affected. Their food, spiritual and cultural practices, and languages are bound to their relationship to the Earth. In addition, the traditional ecological knowledge that has guided Native tribes' stewardship of the land for many generations is gaining more attention and respect from mainstream land managers.

Two recent documentary films produced by Wisdom of the Elders (WOTE) as part of their Native Wisdom Documentary Film Series tell that story vividly. Based in Portland, Oregon, Wisdom of the Elders is committed to preserving and sharing oral histories, cultural and artistic practices, and traditional ecological knowledge. A longtime National Endowment for the Arts grantee, WOTE received two grants to produce and distribute the films—*The Peoples of Western Oregon* and *The Peoples of Eastern Oregon*—including their presentation at a tribal symposium and at tribal gatherings.

We spoke with Tim Keenan Burgess (Paiute/Shoshone), multimedia program director for WOTE and co-producer/co-director of the films,

about the importance of looking to Native cultures for an understanding of how to address climate change and live harmoniously with the Earth, and the importance of the films in presenting that to audiences.

THE FIRST TRUE SCIENTISTS

Natives were the first true scientists at figuring [environmental sustainability] out.

One of our elders, Esther Stutzman (Kalapuya/Coos, Siletz enrolled) from Yoncalla, Oregon, told a great story about before the white people came (the “strangers” as they are sometimes called). The Willamette Valley of Oregon was an oak savanna. Native people would dig trenches and then do controlled low-intensity burns, which prevented forest fires, and all the game would run from the fires and some would jump in these trenches. It would slow roast them, so they're preventing forest fires while hunting and gathering at the same time. Then white people showed up in numbers, took over, outlawed all that, doing no controlled burns. They got forest fires, and then the people started starving.

That was Native science before it was called that, but it was science. They were already doing forest management thousands of years ago. Now we're finally catching up and different forest services are slowly recognizing that.

Natives are on the front lines when it comes to climate change and they always have been. Now,

► Tim Keenan Burgess, multimedia program director for *Wisdom of the Elders*.



it's finally getting out there that almost every environmental movement, every protest, from pipelines to forest management, it's the Native people who are up front doing stuff.

THREE SIDES

It was interesting going around doing all these interviews. I would say every interview, I learned something new.

In the films, there's an interview with master carver and culture keeper Shirod Younker

(Coquille/Coos), who carves traditional wooden canoes. He talks about using both traditional tools and modern tools like band saws or chain saws. But even with power tools, he says he'll never be able to make a canoe as good as the ones the elders built. What's more important for him isn't so much the final product as the artistic practices you use to make the canoe, that connection to our ancestors.

One of the questions we'd always ask is, "What's more important to you, for the people? Is it the land, is it the language, is it the songs, the dancing, is it the art?" All of those things and the foods, the way of life. Often the answer would come back, "Those are all the same thing."

A lot of people have two sides: they have their work side and then they have their home side. But with Natives, a lot of them have three sides. They have their

work side and they have their home side. But then they have their Native side, represented by their regalia, and traditions. It's a way of life to them, but a lot of people don't see all three sides of them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FILMS

The films are multi-use. They work to inform, as films, but they're also broken up into chapters, so they can be used in curriculum. We built lesson plans for the kids, and they could bring in an elder or storyteller from whatever area the school was in. But on top of that, the symposium's also a gathering for us and a celebration of first foods. It's something that we talk about a lot in the films. Sometimes, the symposium's more artist-driven, sometimes it's more environmental, first foods-driven.

At the symposiums and gatherings, we always have the songs and stories and dances. It's a time to really involve our youth, who are usually with their families, all of us hearing the beauty of our original languages spoken and sung. But the arts aren't separate. Like what the elders said, it's all the same thing.

We sent the Eastern film out, and we've gotten into over a dozen

▼ Traditional storyteller Esther Stutzman in a still from the documentary series on the Native people of Oregon.



film festivals. The Eastern film was up for best documentary last year at the 45th American Indian Film Festival in San Francisco, which is the biggest and oldest film festival [dedicated to Native American films]. We were among four to get nominated.

We've been inundated with requests from libraries, schools, and just individual people who want to own it. We got them closed-captioned, and it's been airing on OPB [Oregon Public Broadcasting]. Also, we coordinate with a lot of environmental organizations and libraries to hold special events where they screen the films—the last one was a virtual screening with the Portland-area library system, Multnomah County Library, which is the biggest library system in Oregon. There were over 200 people that watched the film online, and afterwards, we always have a big discussion, a community consultation with everyone. We want to get people's ideas and questions, what they think, and that would influence our thoughts on what we need to show next as well as inform us on the impact we are having.

For everyone making the films, and everyone involved, I think [the impact of the film is] different for each of us. For me, it's always been about Indigenous representation. Getting that out there because it's so needed.

Moving forward, I see good things as long as we can stay resilient, and I don't see any way that we won't. Adapt and change, that's a thing with Native people, so I always end things by saying,



"We've always been here, and we will *always* be here."

Victoria Hutter was an assistant director of the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.

▲ Filming an interview for the documentary on the Warm Springs Reservation in central Oregon.



◀ Traditional carver Shirod Younker in a still from the documentary series on the Native people of Oregon.

Tattoo artist Sarah Whalen-Lunn.



Finding Their Way Back

Traditional Tattoo Artist Sarah Whalen-Lunn (Iñupiaq)

INTERVIEW BY CAROLYN COONS

All photos courtesy of Sarah Whalen-Lunn

Traditional tattoo and visual artist Sarah Whalen-Lunn (Iñupiaq) understands the attention she receives for Inuit tattooing, but she wants it to be clear that the work is not about her.

"I'm a vehicle. I'm a vehicle," she told the Arts Endowment. "It's not my work. I always look at it as uncovering what's always been there. It's more just the work of our ancestors. I happen to be lucky enough that it happens through me."

Funded in part by an Arts Endowment grant, Whalen-Lunn will travel to the Aleut community of St. Paul Island for two weeks of events, including workshops on traditional, ceremonial tattoos in summer of 2022. These workshops will focus on healing generational and historic trauma inflicted upon Alaska Native women, whom these tattoos are traditionally designed by and for. For Whalen-Lunn, whose own mother was removed from her community at birth, the process of learning Inuit tattooing began a healing and reconnecting process that continues to this day.

Whalen-Lunn spoke to the Arts Endowment about where her journey with Inuit tattooing began, its historic significance to Inuit women, and what she hopes this process gives other Alaska Native women, including the Unangan women of St. Paul Island.

CONNECTING TO THE CULTURE

I was maybe in my early 30s when my journey with tattooing began. I worked downtown here in Anchorage as a bartender for 15 years, single mom, just trying to do what I could to get by. I had just started producing art again, and I met another woman, an Iñupiaq artist from Kotzebue, Holly Nordlum. We were in this diaspora artist collective, so we were doing some shows together, and she started talking to me a little bit about this idea that she had to bring back traditional tattoos. Immediately I was like, "What are you talking about? What? We had that? Are you kidding me?"

Eventually it got to the point years later where Holly was collaborating with a woman in Denmark, [Maya Sialuk Jacobsen] who is Inuit as well. [Maya] had done a lot of research and had been working in the traditional way for about five or six years. They started taking formal applications [to train other Inuit women], and I almost missed the deadline. I thought, there are all these other people who are more Native than me. People who aren't mixed, people who know about their history, know about their

background, and I was not one of them. I thought there's no way. I have no chance.

I interviewed, and then before you knew it, Maya was here and I was one of three women in the state being trained as a traditional tattooer. That's how it started. We did all of our procedural work with a licensed tattoo artist up here, Jake Scriver, who's been incredible. It was a complete life change for me—it's still lifechanging for me. We've been doing this for maybe about four or five years now, traditional tattooing here in Alaska.

I think one of the reasons that they wanted me is because there's so many of us who aren't connected. Through colonization, there are so many of us who, like my mom, were taken out of her village through no fault of their own. I've gotten messages from people all over the world, like, "Oh my god, this is me. I just found out. My mom was adopted out," people looking to connect. I think that my story really resonates with a large group of people who are trying to find their way back to who their family is and who they are.

A PROCESS OF HEALING

Inuit tattooing was primarily done by women and for women for a multitude of reasons, not all of which I'll go into here, because that's meant for us and our people. Some things aren't meant to be shared.

▼ Tattoo artist Sarah Whalen-Lunn practicing her art.



► Traditional Inuit tattooing.



to walk around the world wearing your traditional markings.

There's science-backed evidence that any time you start really delving more into your culture and your tradition, it propels you to do better. You want to show up in a better way for your family and your people. It's just so significant, the healing that it can do. That's still a journey. How it's changing me and what it is like for me is still a journey I'm on.

Any time you're working with somebody, working in such an intimate way, skin poking and skin stitching, there's trauma that's held in the body, and even just something as simple as that can be a release that's not expected.

I don't think I know any Indigenous woman who has not been hurt, traumatized, abused, endured some massive form of trauma, either directly perpetuated against them or close family members. We all know someone in our immediate community, and there's been a lot of shame. Throughout the past couple hundred years since colonization, there's been a lot of shame in being an Indigenous woman and being an Indigenous person in general. I don't mean to negate the men from that, and not to say that there weren't men's tattoos either, because as we go along, we're finding more and more men's tattoos as well, but not for the same meanings.

What we've found is the amount of pride and healing that wearing your traditional markings can do for you. When you're out in the world and you don't feel like you fit in, and you're at the grocery store just trying to pick out some oranges and people are looking at you weird. Then you look over and you see another woman with her *tavluḡun*. You don't even have to say anything. You just look and smile at each other. Immediately you are sisters. It has helped so much with rebuilding that strength of self, and I like to say it throws a steel rod down the center of who you are. You really have to be sure of that

These are things we're really, really careful about, because we're not out here trying to create any tutorials. Skin stitching is exactly what it sounds like. It's sewing of the skin. I won't go into exactly how it's done, but it is literally making marks in the skin by sewing it. It was our, as Inuit, first form of tattooing.

RECLAIMING TRADITIONS

I think first and foremost, [what people should know about traditional tattooing] is we always push safety. We have to do this in a way that is safe for our people. Dion Kaszas in Canada, who is a traditional and machine practitioner, is amazing. He's phenomenal. When Holly and I were at a traditional tattoo gathering in Hawai'i, Dion was there, and one of the things that he said just struck a lot of points with me. It was that germ warfare was perpetuated against Indigenous people for a very long time, and we have to be careful with ourselves not to do that. We owe it to our people to proceed in the safest way possible.

One of the things that Holly talked about early on is that it's very important for our people to have—and by our people, I mean all

of our Indigenous brothers and sisters—to have a way to access these markings. It's not just for us in the cities. It belongs out in the villages. It belongs out in the farther, remoter places. This is where it needs to be brought back to. Ultimately the goal [for the Aleut Community of St. Paul project] would be to have an Unangam tattooer, so that everybody has their own person they feel comfortable going to. That's the idea, to make it accessible for all of us.


It's my job to facilitate what they are asking for. It's my job to see how they want me to show up and my job to pay attention to what they're looking for. I'll be the one doing a lot of the hands-on work, but this project is not about me. This project is about St. Paul and the people there and what they're doing. They've gotten to a point where they're asking me to come in. They're ready for something, and how this proceeds has

to be based fully on what they're wanting. This is their project.

Carolyn Coons is the staff assistant in the Office of Public Affairs at the National Endowment for the Arts.



◀ Traditional Inuit tattooing.



A healing session at the 2019 Indigenous Healing Festival. Photo by Willa Shalit

Arts as a Healing Element

Tash Terry (Diné [Navajo]) and Elena Higgins (Maori/Samoan) of IndigenousWays

INTERVIEW BY BRANDON GRYPDE

When musicians Tash Terry (Diné [Navajo]) and Elena Higgins (Maori/Samoan) first met, they quickly decided to join forces as Indigie Femme and set off on a tour of Australia and New

Zealand. As they traveled, the duo purposefully reached out to Indigenous communities as part of their tour. That experience—one that highlighted both the connection and isolation



throughout Australia, New Zealand, and then around the North Island. We played at reservations, prisons, hospitals, festivals, concerts, coffee houses, restaurants, pubs, bars. We got to see what it was like to really be on the road and to feel what it was like to be at the mercy of the audience—if the audience is even going to show up or if they’re going to like you and if you’re going to be able to sustain the road trips financially.

◀ IndigenousWays co-founders Tash Terry and Elena Higgins. Photo by Lea Morales

of these communities—inspired Terry and Higgins to start IndigenousWays, a nonprofit arts organization that focuses on the arts and music as a pathway to connection. Located in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but boasting a global audience, the organization presents events such as the annual, two-day Indigenous Healing Festival, which focuses on the power of arts and music to heal; the Black Mesa Project, which supports Black Mountain families and elders in Arizona, where Terry grew up; and the Wisdom Circle, an online video series that gives Indigenous artists a platform to talk about their art and their lives. The National Endowment for the Arts has supported their programming over the past few years.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has limited in-person events, it has given IndigenousWays the opportunity to grow their virtual presence, including becoming an exemplar of best practices for sign-language interpretation for Native and Indigenous audiences. In their own words, Terry and Higgins recount how their experience as touring musicians inspired IndigenousWays, and also speak about how their identities as Indigenous people inform their approach to accessibility and inclusivity.

COLLABORATIONS AND COMMUNITY

TASH TERRY: Elena and I were introduced by an ASL interpreter colleague of mine back in 2006. We started playing music together [as the musical duo Indigie Femme], and eight months into knowing each other we were on a 47-gig tour

There was so much involved, and we decided to start a nonprofit [as a way to give back to the community.] We started doing festivals on the Navajo Nation, and in Santa Fe with the Institute of American Indian Arts, and collaborating with other coalitions because me and Elena being musicians, Indigenous at that, and women, we’re like, “We can’t do this alone, let’s get other people involved.”

ELENA HIGGINS: A lot of the nonprofit work has been our give back as musicians to the community. What we’ve found on our tours is that we were pretty much the only folk women of

▼ IndigenousWays has provided relief runs to deliver supplies to the Navajo Nation in Black Mountain, Arizona, where Tash Terry grew up, during the pandemic. Photo by Willa Shalit



► IndigenousWays provides Native American Sign Language interpreters for their in-person and virtual events, such as this 2021 Concert Series with Tory Trujillo and Tash Terry with ASL interpreter Martin Watkins. Photo by Elena Higgins



color who are also LGBTQIA2+ and Indigenous. Through the nonprofit IndigenousWays, what has really been important for us in that give back is focusing on supporting our Native American Indigenous brothers, sisters, those that are coming up, our emerging artists, and also our professional artists. Our ethos has been that we can't keep what's been so generously given to us, whether that's our fan base or the growing support that we've received through IndigenousWays. We really believe in community. We really believe that the arts can transform communities.

The blessings of a nonprofit cofounded and run by artists, musicians, has been our connections to fellow professional musicians who we've been able to support through the Wisdom Circle and virtual concert series that we did during the pandemic. We were able to support over 145 Native American Indigenous presenters, including Deaf and Hard of Hearing Indigenous presenters. So that's been really big for us; what we can do in supporting our beloved communities through the arts.

TERRY: The main goal for IndigenousWays is to bridge cultures together that colonization has separated purposefully. It's like no, let's not be historical enemies because of what we read in the books. Let's talk about what happened before that, before colonization. How did we get along with each other? How can we get along now? How can we share seeds? How can we share arts? How can we share songs? How can we share foods? How can we share stories and laughter, and how

can we talk about our pain? How do we juxtapose all that so that we can all be in harmony? That's what IndigenousWays is all about.

ON INCLUSIVITY AND ACCESSIBILITY AS A CULTURAL VALUE

TERRY: I believe in full inclusivity. Since we started this IndigenousWays Wisdom Circle, we've always had [ASL] interpreters. I'm an interpreter too, and I just feel like that's the least I can do, to give back for what has been generously given to me by the Deaf culture. Some of the most neglected people are elders or Indigenous people and also Native American Deaf people on the reservations that don't have communication resources.

HIGGINS: As an Indigenous woman, my greatest asset today is the ways in which I was left out, whether that be in the educational system, family, any institution. A huge part of this [focus on] inclusivity comes from...our experience of being excluded. It's been really fundamental for us in making sure that whether someone is Deaf and Hard of Hearing, or needs wheelchair access, or is blind—being aware of that [need for access].

A lot of it is about the collaborations, particularly from our audiences. We have a huge Deaf and Hard of Hearing audience, and what was really beautiful when we started the online, virtual events with the Wisdom Circle and Concert Series, we had a Deaf audience member who we know very well, who just said,

“Why don’t you think about having Indigenous or Native American interpreters?” Kudos to Tash who had to search far and wide around the country to actually meet those needs, and now we have a really wonderful pool of Native American Indigenous ASL interpreters, which I don’t know if anyone else is doing.

TERRY: What we’ve heard from other Indigenous platforms and nonprofits is, “Wow, you’ve really raised the bar for us other Indigenous people since the Americans with Disabilities Act does not apply to sovereign nations, so there’s a real challenge going on for the interpreting services happening on the reservations.”

I’ve been involved in the interpreting world for a very long time, and it’s a world of its own of gathering as much context as you can before a show that involves a different culture, a different language, music with lyrics, poetry, metaphors that have to be broken down to the target language. When we get a Navajo speaker involved, then I have to find a Navajo interpreter to interpret into English for the [ASL] interpreter, and we do that too. It just turns into this really cool thing.

INDIGENOUS HEALING FESTIVAL

HIGGINS: We really believe art is a healing element, and so having that Indigenous Native American component is really important for us. We started the Indigenous Healing Festival, and collaborated with the Institute of American Indian Arts, particularly the Performing Arts Department, with Dr. Sheila Rocha in 2018.

With Indigenous people, there is that innateness of the spiritual connection, and with the Indigenous Healing Festival, it is that connection that we all bring. With each festival or event, it is really important for us that we have our opening and closing from an elder of that area, on their sacred tribal lands, and also bringing our youth in, which is really fundamental.

TERRY: Engagement [is an important component]. Actual audience hands-on engagement, receiving the smudge, learning some of the chants to go along with the music part, having instruments available like a

whole bunch of djembes and rattles. Get people into the vibe and into the flow, get people into the prayer, and just really engage the audience.

HIGGINS: In 2020, a lot of things got canceled. What was important for us was to keep our communities connected, so we started online virtual events, which was really phenomenal because from that we then tapped into a global audience. Our audience base has gone up tenfold. It’s been a lot of fun, and [in 2021] we were able to take the Indigenous Healing Festival online.

We are very, very blessed with the artists that we work alongside with, the incredible gifts that they bring, the elders, our youth, our seven generations. It’s this whole reciprocal thing of giving back, giving back as artists, giving back because that’s our responsibility when we leave, Tash and myself. At least we’ve known we’ve planted seeds, seeds of hope, seeds of goodness through the arts.

Brandon Gryde is the National Endowment for the Arts director of Presenting & Multidisciplinary Works and Artist Communities.

▼ Elder Arnold Herrera (Cochiti Pueblo) leads a traditional drum-making workshop during the 2019 Indigenous Healing Festival. Photo by Elena Higgins



▼ Writer Kelli Jo Ford (Cherokee). Photo by Val Ford Hancock



Check out our online-only material!

We conduct an audio interview with 2022 NEA Literature Fellow Kelli Jo Ford (Cherokee) about her semi-autobiographical novel *Crooked Hallelujah*, a collection of linked short stories that takes us into the lives of four generations of Cherokee women. Ford believes that fiction by Native and Indigenous writers “should get to be considered as art, too, and not as cultural explainers. And that sometimes we have to insist upon that.”

We also feature a video looking at educator and musician Chris Newell (Passamaquoddy) and his work with the Mystic River Singers and on a special project with Yo-Yo Ma.

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